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Serving a New Generation of Students: A Conversation about the History Program's Curriculum Grant

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List of Acronyms: EO=Executive Officer, AHA=The American Historical Association, GC=Graduate Center

NB: Hello listeners. Thank you for tuning into this PublicsLab archival interview. I'm Nic Benacerraf, a former PublicsLab fellow and co-editor of the PublicsLab Archive. I am also a doctoral candidate in the [Theatre and Performance Program](#) at the [CUNY Graduate Center](#), which is sometimes called the Grad Center, or simply the GC.

The following conversation showcases the work of faculty and students who received Doctoral Curriculum Enhancement Grants (DCEGs). It funded specific initiatives proposed by teams in programs across the GC, as they developed structural enhancements to advance the possibilities of public scholarship within their culture and curricula and sought to make good on the GC's mission of "Knowledge for the public good."

In this interview, conducted in March of 2023, I speak with recipients of the Curriculum Grant given to the History program at the GC. [Professor Annie Valk](#) and doctoral student Deena Ecker discuss the role of the public historian, how to free the field of history from antiquated notions of academia, and the importance of advocating for up and coming scholars. Thanks for listening.

It would be really nice if you would each introduce yourselves with your name, your pronouns, what your role was on the project, and at the CUNY Graduate Center in general. Annie, would you start?

AV: Sure. Hi, I'm Annie. I use she/her pronouns and I am a professor of History and the director of the [American Social History Project / Center for Media and Learning](#). I have been at the Graduate Center three years. I arrived a month before Covid shut everything or forced us all out of the building, so I've had a perhaps unusual experience at the Graduate Center so far. And in terms of this grant, I was one of the people with [Joel Allen](#) who conceptualized and drafted the grant and have been working with Joel, replaced by [Jonathan Sassi](#), who is now the EO, working closely with Deena as well, to head up what I think of as both research and programming-- and curricular reform.

NB: Wonderful. Thank you.

DE: I'm Deena Ecker. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a fourth year graduate student in the History department. And Joel and Annie approached me after they had mostly completed the grant saying that they needed a student representative to be part of it, and asked me to be that student representative, which I enthusiastically said yes to. So

I've been working as the student liaison, the student voice, with Joel and Annie and then Jonathan Sassi as well.

NB: Thank you. And so I guess, if this project has been going on for two and a half years, Annie, this has been the vast majority of your time at Grad Center. (She laughs.) And I guess you were coming in pretty fresh to the program in some ways. What did you understand about the History program's needs and desires when this initiative was launched? What was the issue that you were hoping to address?

AV: I would say, although I'm new to the Graduate Center, I am not new to the faculty. I've been working in universities and as a professor for 25, 30 years. I think one of the issues in my mind, which extends beyond the Graduate Center, is a profession-wide issue, which has been a challenge to broaden the way in which History PhD students are trained-- in order to both reflect students changing needs and interests, and to reflect the realities of the ways in which the job market has been changing. And I think both of those things are important-- that the many faculty, including me, of earlier generations, our expectations were that the purpose of graduate education was to become a member of the faculty. Although we couldn't be guaranteed a job by any means, there was a sense that there was a more direct line between doing a PhD in History and being hired to work as a faculty member.

Now I think the reality is very different than that, because of the supply of jobs on the other end. And also because, as the academy has diversified, and as the field of history has changed, it's also attracting people who have lots of different kinds of interests.

But the ways in which History PhD programs are structured has not necessarily changed to keep up with those other changes. In my mind, that is really what the purpose of this grant was. To think about, what is our program doing? What are our expectations of students? And how can we best serve students who may have a broad way of thinking about what the purpose of their education is, about the kinds of skills and, opportunities that come with a graduate program in a broader way. So I see these as issues that really extend beyond public history.

NB: Thank you. There's so much wonderful offerings that you just made in there. I was wondering, you identify as a public historian and I was curious what that means to you? We have so much, you're right, diversity emerging in the field in terms of how we identify disciplinarily, even within the same programs, and also, what that means, for us as individuals who carry multiple identities. But for you as a person, it may be helpful to start demystifying some of the broad language.

AV: So I do define myself as a public historian, but I have always done that work from the position of being a faculty member or a staff at a university or college. But many public historians work in public institutions. They work in cultural organizations museums, historic sites. They work for organizations like the National Park Service, or state and local and federal government jobs. They work as video producers as Deena did, or other kinds of content producers like that. So public historians are really the people who are interacting with the public in a way that like mediates research and the public quest and thirst for knowledge.

A lot of academic historians, people like me, are also engaged in doing that work --partnering with cultural organizations-- because they think their research has a broader public relevance and interest and importance. And so they're interested in thinking about how they share their own research more broadly as well.

NB: One question more on this topic. I'm curious, have you noticed over the time that you've been on faculties in various places, a change in the field about how acceptable this kind of engagement is?

AV: Absolutely. So I would say I'd never heard the term "public history" when I went to graduate school. My own entry into this is through oral history. As a graduate student, I was hired to work on a very large, grant-funded oral history project, and that's what got me interested in all of this.

Even though I was doing that as a graduate student, my sense was that I should not tell anybody that I was interested in public history, or oral history. It felt like it was a secret, like a dirty secret that I had to keep from the faculty that I worked with, that I was interested in doing research that wasn't just gonna end up in monographs that 600 people would read, but that I was interested in doing other kinds of work. I really, really felt like I couldn't talk about that, or that I would be seen as not a serious student. And I do think that that has changed some.

One of the other big changes has been the pervasiveness now of access to digital technology, and the way in which that has made public-facing work much more accessible for people. It's created so many more platforms in which people can share their work with public audiences. And so I think that has really changed, the way in which academic faculties think about this work.

The other change is the job market. There is no certainty at all around faculty positions. And, so some of the change I think is coming from what I see as like a negative place. It's a defensiveness in a sense that, "oh, we need to take public history seriously because our students aren't gonna get academic jobs." But I think the more, much more positive thing is also that there's a sense that we can do so much more, that there are lots of exciting opportunities to share our research, in lots of different kinds of forums and platforms and settings.

NB: Yeah, Thank you.

Deena, this might be a really nice time to ask you, from your perspective as a student, how does this field look to you and what are students looking for?

DE: Yeah. I think that's the thing is that I came to the graduate school with a unique outlook. I'm gonna keep myself open to any possibility. So yes, I will apply to the academic job market if positions look interesting to me. But that was never my main goal. It was never my main purpose. In fact, one of the things that I found appealing about the Graduate Center as a program is that that seemed like a place where that would be more okay than, say, one of the Ivys, where they still are trying to put their students into that academic job market. So what Annie was saying about it being a dirty secret when you were in graduate school, Annie, I think that in some places that's still true.

I talked to a friend who was at Princeton who said like exactly what you're saying, like, "oh, it's a step down to do anything other than academia, but we see that maybe you're not gonna get academic jobs, so for you second class citizen graduate students, here are some other options." Which is, in my opinion, so terrible, and so I feel like I'm so glad that we have Annie and people who are willing to see that this is actually not an A minus or like a B job.

Engaging with public audiences is so important, either as a public historian or in the other ways that Annie was talking about-- in consulting, and in government work, and in teaching outside of the Academy, and public school teaching, and secondary education, and curriculum development. All of these things are ways that people learn history and ways that academically trained historians can enrich the conversation about history in the world.

NB: What I'm hearing is a couple things. One is that despite all the changes in the field, or perhaps because of all the changes in the field, someone like you can enter this program with the kind of determination and, ownership of this approach that other faculty can see, understand, and appreciate. And then also what I'm hearing is this interest in efficacy and it's not something that the humanities have been very good at discussing in the past. We're doing this ethical thing, it's granted in Enlightenment ethics, perhaps but it's not necessarily filtered through the same rubrics that you're talking about, which is, how can we transform the experience of the most number of people, and make this knowledge accessible and meaningful?

DE: To me, what better purpose of a trained historian could there be than that?

AV: And I would say --boom, boom, boom-- so many things. How do I want to put this? It's reciprocal and it's synergistic. A lot of my experiences in doing public history work is not that I am "the expert" sharing my knowledge, but that it's very much reciprocal and learning. That has not only changed the way in which I think about history and historical topics, but also has ended up being some of the most personally rewarding, emotionally fulfilling work that I've done as an academic.

I have found that to be so much more meaningful than sitting by myself and writing, which is what I do also-- that is not unmeaningful to me-- but the way in which I can be involved in a kind of democratic "small d" learning, and participatory conversations about what is important about the past, that's what matters to me. That's what makes me get out of bed in the morning.

My hope is that, as a graduate program, we can take seriously creating lots of different kinds of opportunities and flexibility for students to figure out what they want to do and where they belong, and where they can make the kind of contribution that they most want to make. And give them the opportunities, give them the skills and the experience that they need to be able to do that kind of work.

NB: Which sounds like a perfect segue into what the activities were that you were pursuing in the grant. I'd be curious to hear, with all this in mind, what you did with your time and where you are in the process now?

AV: (Laughs.) So there's where the structural realities collide with the idealism around that.

NB: Which is, I think, so instructive for people to hear because, for as individualized and program-based as these structural realities can be, a lot of them are quite familiar to universities everywhere. What were you hoping to make available, and what changes were you pursuing, or are you pursuing?

AV: So Deena, I think we were talking about research, leading to curricular changes, and then programs.

DE: Right. So the visible stuff, the front-end stuff. We had multiple round tables with alumni who were working outside of academia, in various kinds of positions that were very well received by the students, to see what else could they do? That was the big front-end thing. There was the faculty meeting with-- I don't remember exactly.

AV: Yeah, the [American Historical Association](#), which is the primary professional association for US historians. They have also been working very actively over the last few years around these issues of rethinking graduate education. And we had a meeting with faculty from the Graduate Center's History Program and the leadership of the American Historical Association to talk about different career pathways. They actually collect data on an institutional level to see what are alums of different programs doing, in an aggregate sense.

DE: So what we did on the backend here was look at different public history programs that existed, and what their curriculum looked like, and what courses they offered, and developed courses based on that. Internships were like this thing that kept coming up over and over again in everything we did. So putting it into the curriculum was like a really good way to open up these kinds of opportunities for students to explore other professions after graduate school.

So in addition to the courses, one of the things that we did, which was very personally fulfilling for me (I was the test case as it turned out) is that in our handbook, before we even started this work, there was one line that said: one of your languages, for the language requirement could be another research skill such as statistics or coding. It gave two examples, but it was also very ambiguous.

Before I came into the program, I was like, "Oh, I wonder if I could make video editing my other research skill, and not have to take a language requirement," since I don't speak a language that's actually useful for my research. And I sat down in Professor in Joel Allen's office, my first semester and I was like, I wanna do this. And he was like, "But how would we even do it? I don't even know how we would test for that." And that first interaction about this, which was what, like two and a half, three years before I actually, got that test done, was figuring out that problem. But how do we even measure this? Because there is no such thing as a test, right? How can you know that I am as good at video editing as somebody is who can translate a passage in another language?

So that was the challenge. We came up with a way to do that, and hopefully there will be other students who take advantage of this in the future. But I was the test case.

NB: Wow.

DE: Now there is a way for students to use other research skills as their language requirement. As long as they're an Americanist.

NB: And this rubric, it applies beyond just video editing?

DE: Yeah, you have to have had a project. So I had done a paper that was an academic project where I combined writing a paper with editing video. So you have to have had an academic project that uses the skill. And then you submit that academic project that uses that skill to a committee of three, and you talk them through what the skill is and how you used it. Kind of a demonstration a little bit, almost. Then they discuss, and you come back in the room, and it was a little bit, like a little pre-exam exam. I think that's the rubric, right? Annie? Did I miss any part of it?

AV: I guess a few things to say about all that. This was already in the handbook, so the program at some point had agreed that this was a good idea. But the program faculty continued to see this as something that should be only in very rare exceptions. We were also trying to write into the requirements that students be able to create formats for presenting their research in addition to a traditional academic research paper.

I think to me, this is an area that I would like to see us keep pushing, because I think that this is going to appeal to students who understand that there are lots of powerful ways in which they can present their research. And that this is where the humanities is headed. Places like University of Michigan, and Yale-- there are graduate programs in the humanities that are completely revamping how they think about dissertation formats and what dissertation should look like. And moving away from the expectation that your dissertation is essentially your first monograph. You know, I think the Graduate Center needs to catch up, and then do more than catch up. We should be at the forefront of thinking in more creative ways about what research and dissertations can look like.

DE: I'll say 20 years ago, it was actually almost exactly 20 years ago now, I sat in the chair of the department of my undergraduate university and said, I wanna make a documentary for my thesis. And he said, you're gonna be the first do it well, because I don't think you're gonna be the last.

This was 20 years ago. And this was like an old school guy but he saw that this is where the world was going. My thesis advisor never knew what to do with me, because at that time my work was on a desktop in my dorm room. Like, I couldn't just bring it over to show him what I was working on. I would sit in his office, he'd be like, how's it going? And I'd be like, "It's good!" He didn't know what to do with me. But they did accept it and they did do it. If they saw that 20 years ago, we should certainly be able to see it today.

NB: The difficulty of starting, of being the first one to do it, is a gift that you gave to the program. You know? It's extra work, and it's something that hopefully, by having done so, you keep the doors open. And perhaps a call for other faculty members, everywhere, to look at those students who are willing to try that thing first, and widen the doors a bit, and say yes.

AV: I want to say, again, kudos to Deena for having done that. And Deena was really doing that separate from this grant, but it was all happening at the same time. And it

was part of why we knew Deena was the person we wanted to work with us on this grant.

But the other thing related to what you just said, Nic, you know, I absolutely think that students are the drivers of this change. They are the reason why there is a public historian now in the graduate program at the GC. It was their organizing around getting a public history course introduced several years ago that then led to the department creating the position that I got hired for.

Students are going to be the folks who are driving any of the other changes. I think as faculty we need to figure out how to support them, and to hopefully not recreate the situation where students feel like they can't fully live out their dreams. I see it as our role as faculty to help students get the skills and the opportunities that they need in order to live out their dreams. Not to tell them that they can't do "that". I think we can do that as faculty and still have high standards, and high expectations of students. That it's not lowering our expectations in any way to create situations that will open as many doors as possible.

NB: And the word public scholarship can mean so many different things, but the notion of smoothing those pathways feels like a real consequence. And I was curious, confronting these issues on so many levels, through the PublicsLab and elsewhere, how do these changes and these efforts fit into that larger journey here at the Graduate Center? Do you see yourself connected to other efforts?

AV: I guess the other place that I've connected with some is the [Center for the Humanities](#), which has lots of really exciting, community-centered work going on. Programs that are bringing what I would call community scholars, people who are doing scholarly research but are not based in a university, and giving them opportunities to collaborate with scholars at the GC. I think it's doing really important, exciting work.

I run the American Social History Project, which also runs the [New Media Lab](#), so other centers at the GC that are thinking about how to make research publicly accessible.

And then there are just so many great public scholars, people like [Ruthie Gilmore](#) who are just doing incredibly important work, and who see their audience as an audience that is much bigger than just other academics. So I do think the Grad Center is special in that way.

NB: I have one more question for you, but I wanted to ask if there's anything that feels like we haven't addressed yet so far, or anything you wanted to add in on top of what we've shared so far?

DE: Currently, outside of this grant I have an internship that is funded by the PublicsLab. I didn't realize it was funded by the PublicsLab when I applied for it, and I thought for sure Stacy was going to be like, "No, Deena, we cannot give you any more." But I know that back when I was still working at the [Gotham Center](#), which is, you know, a hybrid institution, the PublicsLab also supported us with interns and things like that. I think that so much of those internships that we were talking about that you can get at the GC are funded by the PublicsLab, or supported by the PublicsLab, and I think it's gonna be a real loss for public humanities in general when the PublicsLab shutters.

And I didn't even know that Annie and Joel were, were putting together this grant when they approached me. And I think that, yes it is students who are maybe driving faculty to start thinking about this, but I do appreciate, as a student, that there are faculty within the [History department](#), not just Annie, but many faculty who are willing to, even with varying degrees of resistance, to explore these options, and to see where it goes.

NB: My last question as we start to wrap this up is, looking around, do you have any advice that you have for other people looking to do similar efforts in their programs? You know, you mentioned that there are certain programs that are leading the field, but let's assume that most are behind the Graduate Center right now in terms of these efforts. Do you have any words of encouragement?

AV: I guess one thing that I think we did well--and Deena I liked how you put this, as like the upfront and then the back end-- the way in which we were able to think about a public education piece as being a critical part. So really needing to do our research and then think about, How do we create opportunities for faculty in particular to learn about what's possible? And to, perhaps in a structured way, think about, What would A and B look like?

And I guess one other piece is Deena mentioned the alumni events that we did, and I think one of the other benefits of doing those events was reconnecting some alumni with the program who, because of the dirty secret stuff that we talked about before, some of them I think felt like they had become marginalized or felt unsure about their connection with the program, because they weren't doing what they thought they were supposed to be doing once they finished their degree.

So I do think there is another benefit in terms of helping those alums feel more connected and feel like they're a welcome part of the program. That's gonna play out in probably unpredictable ways in the future, but I think that gives us another set of resources to build on as we continue to do this work.

NB: And it also has the added benefit of a) demonstrating to students that other things are possible, and b) that they're valued by bringing them back into the program.

AV: That's right.

DE: Yeah. The faculty, like why should they know how to help us with this? But there are people who, it is their experience, who are still associated with the program, who are still associated with the Graduate Center, who can.

NB: I am so grateful for both of you, Annie and Deena, for spending time sharing the depth of your work today, and the generosity of your collaboration with one another. I hope that it's useful to folks all over the humanities, but especially gives some real encouragement and chutzpah to programs in history, and to the future of this program, as it continues to grow into a vision that you share. So, for spending time with us today.

The PublicsLab was an initiative at the GC that supported the transformation of graduate education through fellowships for doctoral students, [Curriculum](#)

[Enhancement Grants](#) for departments and programs, and programming for all that showcased and workshopped the methods and practices of public scholarship.

It was funded from 2018 to 2023 by the Mellon Foundation. [Stacy Hartman](#) was the Director of the program, [Professor Bianca Williams](#) served as its Faculty Lead, [Professor Kandice Chuh](#) Interim Faculty Lead, and [Professor David Olan](#) was the grant's principal investigator.